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### Tiny Victories

Kayma Snook

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# **TINY VICTORIES**

## **Honors Thesis**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in English**

**In the College of Arts and Sciences  
at Salem State University**

By

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Faculty Advisor  
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Commonwealth Honors Program  
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## Abstract

*Tiny Victories* is a poetry collection that was experiential as much as it was research based. In preparing for this creative project, I read many collections, and spoke to poets to discuss their process. Preparation for this collection included writing free-hand in my journal for months, and reaching back into old journals I've kept since middle school and then transferring and editing these words to craft poems. This required reflection, revisiting old pain and past loves and ultimately a reworking of my world. In this collection I explored themes of mental health, memory, nostalgia, trauma, time and healing. The title *Tiny Victories* was meant to capture a duality with tiny obviously meaning small and victory invoking a large feeling of conquest. I used this to define a concept of "baselines" without actually ever using the term. This concept was introduced to me by an old therapist and has changed my perspective and provides comfort. It basically means we all have different capacities on different days. Getting out of bed or taking a shower on some days is a real win for me, which is not to say I am not also capable of accomplishing astronomical feats. I wanted to make this focus and idea clear to validate my experience as well as potentially those of my readers. This collection features an applied study of a variety of classic forms as well as free-verse. The collection is divided into two sections titled *Unlearning* and *Relearning*, which is meant to repeat the duality within the cycle of human development, involving both regression and rebuilding. This theme is repeated throughout the collection to tell a story of revisiting and reframing trauma and experience for therapeutic purposes.

## Process Information

In this collection, I wanted to apply what I had learned in my college career about crafting creative writing. To do this I had to do more research about the process, and accomplished that by visiting with different published poets and connecting with them through questions about intention and their personal process. One thing seemed to stick out as a common factor in everyone's advice: be authentic. Everyone I spoke to seemed to come back to this idea, of being confident in the development of your unique voice as a poet. I took this advice to heart and wrote about what I needed to, and what resonated with me, instead of writing about what I thought people would want to hear or to emulate my favorites.

## Reflections

I learned so much through this process. Not only have I learned about the composition and editorial aspect of arranging a poetry collection, but it was also an intensely therapeutic process that forced me to analyze my own patterns, trauma, past and memories. I revisited old journals and letters for inspiration and rewrote plenty of pieces. This process was intensive and emotional, allowing me to reconnect with and observe intimate parts of my psyche that had previously been compartmentalized. This taught me a lot about the emotional task that comes with writing authentic poetry from the heart. For the future, I want to gain more mastery over different forms and utilize those. I also want to experiment with more line breaks, indentations and just the general rhythm and flow of my free-verse poems because I stayed a bit within my comfort zone for this collection.

# Tiny Victories

Kayma Snook

I dedicate these words to anyone who has ever doubted the power and validity of their own voice or experience. Your existence is a necessary art. Keep creating.

## Unlearning

## FORGIVENESS, PERSISTENCE

When I feel like this,  
All raw skinned and thin  
Like every half-smoked cigarette  
Left to dissolve in the rain  
I pray,  
To a god without a name  
That the times I hurt someone,  
Is not what stays.  
I've learned happiness isn't something  
You can just make stick  
Only I can forgive myself,  
Meet eyes with the monster inside that only wants to eat me alive  
Only I can unwrap the bitten fingertips of clenched fists  
Whisper into palms all the apologies and affirmations  
Never delivered,  
But always deserved

## BODY

Sometimes my body is vessel to hold mac & cheese

Sometimes a pillow for my cat to sleep

It has been a weapon

Fashioned carefully into hardness

An arrowhead

It has been a wasteland I toss trash into

Which splinter inside me

Like chicken bones

It can be a boomerang in which I distance myself from

And returns back to me in unexpected moments of sympathy

Sometimes my body is an abandoned building

Set up for squatters

Hallways congested with ghosts

It can be artistic

In its movement and what I fashion from it

Sometimes it's sacred geometry:

Everything with a purpose, a perfection

A meaning

It has been my greatest treasure, my most cursed cruelty

But only one thing is it always:

Mine.

## GROWING DOWN

Do we see people as they are, or as we want to?

growing up came with dismantling skewed childhood views

eventually

the tooth fairy became my mother

my father became an asshole

and God became just wishful thinking

I wonder if anyone's ever seen me as I really am

when you grow up in a broken home

you never learn how to build a structurally sound shelter on your own

my father was a contractor

who made beautiful houses

but our home never came to fruition,

always under construction

he passed on to me the pain of misplaced effort

in the form of two blue thumbs

with no blueprints

I have my mother's eyes

sometimes grey

sometimes blue

sometimes green

always pleading: please

while in my own bed, I want to go home  
nostalgic for a feeling I've never known  
I've learned to fashion temporary shelter  
from the ruins at hand  
materials salvaged in self-destruction

I've grown tolerant to chaos  
need something stronger  
I find a sense of belonging  
in the greedy lips and strangling grip of a stranger.  
on psychedelics, staring at the rainbow grease puddle sinking in the sidewalk  
let it be a leak into another dimension,  
a world meant for me

life feels like a long commute home  
it's rush hour  
cars crawling  
furious drivers sing to silence through  
muted snarling  
and the guardrail is calling my name like the cold side of the pillow

death is a tall black Victorian-style house  
with bone white trim  
out front, bushes of pink chrysanthemum  
the grim reaper sleeps in the tower,  
spooning his scythe  
each day I  
creep closer to the great mahogany doors  
to let out the breath I've held in for too long

and whisper under it,  
honey, I'm home

## SESTINA

I remember our kitchen, a jungle of house plants  
 how the sun stretched over the tile to kiss the cat,  
 in the same spot every morning. I remember how you'd save every jam jar  
 to fill with buttons, pennies, pencils: small, organized chaos feels fine.  
 I remember my resourcefulness, as much as the violence.  
 It was not yours or mine, but something we kept from our childhood address.

What makes a home? Is it the roof over us? The address  
 on the mailbox? The posters we hung up? The flowers I plant  
 in a crystalline vase, center table, just for them to succumb to the violence  
 of nature a week later. Maybe it's the cat,  
 the way he looks so at peace, contented. Okay fine,  
 he's not always happy but neither are we - the way we jar

each other with rage. Why can't we walk away? Leave the front door ajar  
 let the breeze in, so I can feel the full weight of its empty - address  
 me - head on - what we're working with, where we're working from. I'm not fine.  
 you need nutrients for growth, some places are just starved of it. The pothos plant  
 reminds me of myself, leaves yellowing, vines crawling, yearning. The cat  
 is not something to hold on to for too long, he'll turn to violence

like a switch, bite the hand that feeds him, this violence  
 is not the answer, it never claimed to be. We can trap our fears in jars  
 to keep and hold like something sacred. Refuse to learn from the cat  
 about brutal honesty and acceptance, instead, buy myself a dress.  
 If I can't manifest success I'll dress up as it, wear red lipstick to bed. Plant

seeds of trying, pray they'll grow into sunflowers with big fine

smiling faces that will turn to one another when they're out of sun. To feel fine...  
I forget what it feels like. Who would I be with the absence of perpetual violence  
gnawing from the inside? Like my irrational fear of the neighborhood nuclear plant  
where people breed war, when it's safety we need. Keep destruction in a jar.  
Play chicken with triggers, wipe clean the address,  
evidence that others have been here before. I swear he's an evil fucker too, the cat

I mean - unconcerned with eyes all knowing. Does every cat  
sit on the sofa like he's God? Maybe he does know. And we are fine,  
even if we don't feel it. Maybe we can build without an address,  
wherever we go, recast the role of violence  
as an essential piece of the flow, smash the samples in their jars,  
stop obsessing over wet specimens, how to float in formaldehyde. Not every plant

can be preserved, life's lawless address of ultraviolence  
lives in the cat, who embraces his nature and gets by just fine  
no jar can hold our roots. Where we land, we'll plant.

## ANTI-SONNET

A quiet, stubborn rage  
sits down deep like a sunken stone  
I see you, in your homemade cage  
I see myself in you, the fear of being left alone  
I said it wasn't like you  
to fight with commands  
taste hate, neither spit nor swallow, but chew  
all I could see - feel - was my throat in your hands  
the night you shattered the light fixture in frustration  
I couldn't help but shiver  
you mistook my fear for an accusation  
in your fire, I wither  
this self pity, hatred, all consuming  
the destructive nature of assuming

## THE BINARY

I don't know much about anything  
but if there's one thing I know  
(besides the inescapable fact that we all die someday)  
It's that there's always more than two types of people  
no matter the variety of binary they're enforcing  
there's always more than two choices  
we just reduce

I fight with my professor over the "validity" of a singular they  
she asks if I've been marked down for its usage in my academic writing,  
I tell her passive aggressively:  
*most professors can recognize and appreciate humanity, experiential accuracy*  
*the evolution of how we understand ourselves*

I was a dog person  
until a cat padded over my heart while sleeping on a friend's couch,  
chose my chest to lie in  
just one of the million moments when I re-remember  
I don't need words to define love, at least definitively

I used to think I only liked boys  
like that  
until I met someone who showed me it's okay  
to be different versions of yourself on different days,  
that no one stays the same  
she taught me it's brave to love things that don't love us back

to be yourself, when everyone is trying to find somebody else to be  
there will always be another world we'll never know completely  
but I know  
as good as anybody  
that people are mostly experts in themselves  
and you are not entitled to an explanation  
but responsible,  
for repeatedly  
taking oneself apart  
and putting it all back together again

a process of being  
instead of becoming  
there's no missing pieces to discover,  
nothing broken to fix  
a mosaic: already complete in its fragmented state  
we need space to grow  
just as much as shelter  
there's freedom in  
that left unfinished

## SUBJECTIVE SATIATION

*"If this isn't nice what is?"*

- Kurt Vonnegut

I never minded my cluttered closet  
the ash and soil and cat hair in everything  
I always thought of

*Do you believe in destiny?*

to be too romantic a concept to meditate on  
all I knew was that I was destined to pay rent next week  
and therefore destined to put these non slip shoes on  
then fill the tank to take me to my \$5/h waitressing gig

my parents taught me  
you don't need money to be happy  
but when they stopped making dinner  
I realized you need money to eat  
I've learned how to smile  
and mean it  
on an empty belly  
I taught myself  
and I'm still learning

there's this passage  
I still remember from reading

*The Family Under The Bridge*

in my 6th grade English class

where the homeless man sits down outside

the French restaurant he can't afford a crumb from,

squints his eyes and bops his head

to make a dancing show of the Parisian lights,

inhales just the distant smell of decadence for his dinner

and is satisfied

## BLOODLETTING

all of my poems stopped having happy endings  
because I didn't care if the ending was happy or not  
so long as it came  
how can you find the words  
to tell someone you love  
you want to die

the only thing I wanted then was to become nothing  
my mother drove me home wailing in the passenger seat,  
gritting my teeth to stop myself from slamming  
my skull on the dashboard so all  
the evil thoughts could tumble out

when we got home,  
she drew me a bath like I was a baby again  
made a makeshift womb of warm water for me  
to lie in - fetal position -  
overflowing with pain  
swallowing water so  
we could become one  
and the same:  
a flowing substance  
something less sensitive  
with the tenacity it takes to survive

I know the feeling  
of being trapped in your own skin  
the feeling of nothing that's so consuming  
you begin to succumb,  
become it  
to want to let the blood out of your  
wrists like weightless ribbons  
if only bloodletting were a viable practice  
if only there were a sure-fire way...  
to get the evil out

we have to find better methods of coping  
than cutting ourselves open!  
destroying ourselves everyday  
in little ways  
lusting for death, an addiction  
smoking too much  
driving too fast on the highway  
developing a sense of apathy,  
this reckless honesty  
like the way the brutal truth  
pours out onto the page  
ink stained

and that's all it was at first,  
a looming blotch of violent thought  
until the day I became Icarus  
flew too close to the sun  
except the sun was black and empty

Apollo with a veil of darkness  
and I -  
I was smitten

all I can say  
after coming back from such a dark place  
is it feels surreal  
unnatural  
like you don't belong

jamais vu:  
the French phenomenon of being in  
a place you always knew  
yet it's unfamiliar now  
as if someone had cut you open  
and surgically removed every memory of it  
from inside of you

I had to learn all over again  
how to cope with basic existence  
just. being. here.  
I began again, how everything begins  
with baby steps  
start using old birthday cards as bookmarks  
to remind me of this mantra:  
you are loved  
you are alive  
and you cannot let yourself die  
because you'd take pieces of your siblings'

souls along with you

if you crawled into that years-in-the-making,  
imagined, golden tomb  
if the world doesn't feel like it was made for you  
that's because it wasn't  
but we can make it ours  
we can learn together  
after coming back from such pain  
how to love again  
on accident,  
in little ways  
when you forget to hold back, find yourself laughing  
that bottom of the belly, hands in the mud  
natural kind of laugh

we can find a way  
stay up until the middle of the night  
for that glimmer of a moment where we finally feel okay  
because Emerson said the purpose of the stars  
is so we can stare blindingly  
sit directly  
face to face  
with the sublime  
and here we are on the hood of your car on this January night  
winter is eating us alive  
but it's okay  
because if we can feel the bite  
of the bitter cold it means we're still breathing

and living is something we're meant to do  
and when the warm springtime sunshine returns  
we'll feel that too  
but for now I'll wait it out with you  
we're supposed to be here  
and I swear to god  
we're gonna be alright

## CORRECTING MISCONCEPTIONS OF OWNERSHIP

when your new girlfriend posted a picture of the two of you  
for your anniversary  
my thumb hovered over the screen  
frozen mid mindless scrolling  
I tried to remember  
what it was like to stand next to you

in the photo  
you were wearing *my* sweater  
her looking at you,  
you were cradling  
*my* guitar  
in your hands  
by the plastic Christmas tree  
we used to pull out of its cardboard box once a year  
and stack together like layers in a cake

I know that spot on the rug  
it used to be mine  
or it felt like it was

when I think on it  
I had surely inherited that sweater from a friend  
and that guitar was overflow from my Father's own collection  
nothing is ever ours

no matter how much you work, pay or pray for it

I know, this year, your mother has probably already given  
her a set of Christmas PJ's to match the family  
but I'll remember fondly  
how miraculous it felt  
to hold you  
even if only for  
a little while

## MEMORY

whatever I touch turns to

memory

too quickly

the Midas of impermanence

I wish you were here with me

no - I wish I didn't

always feel this yearning

this mourning

when I am here

I am also not

instead

lost in thought

hollowed

retreated into a more familiar existence

the present becomes the past so rapidly

my mind feels like a spinning top

that never stops

wobbling

like the Earth rotating on its tilted axis

moving from

coming to

leaning toward

then away

from the sun

learning

unlearning

piecing together

and coming undone

## REPETITION

moving in circles  
and forward  
simultaneously:  
biking home  
out of your backpack  
pokes a paper bag  
from the grocery  
around the bottleneck of  
your favorite brandy

I think of you  
while I wait for you  
to come home to me

yesterday's criticisms echo  
through me  
I am not here  
not inside this body  
I offer to you, upon returning  
like an apology gift

## WHEN THERE IS NOTHING LEFT

when there is something we cannot give one another,  
can we build it?  
look for it, wait for it, together?  
when there is nothing left to give or exchange - sans words today  
will you sit with me? In silence,  
until the words come or sleep finds me  
we'll keep buying produce that goes bad before we use it:  
bananas drooping in the kitchen like ripe corpses  
collecting flies  
forget the cuppa on the counter,  
let it grow cold

when I let the hair in my armpits and on my legs go,  
grow  
become unladylike, unruly  
will you hold me?  
when I get like this, too sad to make a meal  
but not to snack on the individual ingredients  
when I talk like this,  
like it makes no difference  
swearing it all ends up in the same place  
will you sit with me?  
let the sun swallow us  
be content in our discontent  
alive in our fear  
survivors in solidarity

## Relearning

## TINY VICTORIES

I got out of bed today,  
not to meet friends or keep appointments,  
but for no reason other than a cup of coffee  
and a piece of leftover cheesecake.  
I dressed up today,  
not for other eyes,  
but, for no reason other than to watch the way my skirt floats  
around my hips when twirling to the tune of a swing record.  
I went outside today,  
not to weed the garden or fetch the mail,  
but for no reason other than to lie in the grass, to feel the sun and smell the dirt.  
I didn't call you today,  
not because I wanted to give you space or felt simply, that you'd be better off without  
me,  
but because, lately, I've been regaining my footing in a world  
I've since realized is my own for the making

## OBLIVION

it seems you can never find the cicada singing  
unseen concerto  
summer oblivion  
only at its most vulnerable, most beautiful  
after cracking open and climbing out of  
its protective skeleton

how brave it is  
to sit in chartreuse solitude  
to trust the sun will come for you  
in time: warm and dry your  
fresh, moist flesh  
to know, that somewhere in  
an illuminated future  
there will be wind in your wings  
and a scream in your heart again

## MARCH SNOW

came falling, piling up  
slowly, silently  
laying a quilt of quiet  
over the obnoxious junk  
in our backyard  
putting chaos at peace

like how my mother  
is made younger  
when she slips into sleep  
on the swivel chair  
huddled by the space heater,  
in front of the TV  
while *Cheers* reruns  
play through static flurries  
a couple hollow wine bottles at her feet

the yellow-green clock numbers glow: 9:33  
she has to be up at 3 in the morning  
I stir her into a half-here state  
just enough to lead her to bed  
lay two more duvets over her body  
as a couple of Chihuahuas curl into the curves of her calves

I find my place in the next room

and watch the snowfall in a silence so  
beautiful I cannot speak  
making certain my loneliness

## DORMANCY

why do we punish ourselves for our natural pathology  
the way so many organisms require a sunken state,  
a shivering temperature to stimulate a necessary dormancy

how the redwoods rely on fire  
a burning erasure  
an internal catastrophe  
a moment of silence  
heed an ancient knowledge

waves of suffering tend to ripple  
into all my reactions,  
it seems  
we're more animal than we pretend to be  
more so ruled by nature than we'd like to believe  
when I call you arrogant, egotistical,  
I mean, me too.  
we're both just foraging for more shiny  
fragments of trash to collect and covet like crows

fall that fades into winter has always been my favorite  
it's the one time a year we can  
inhale decay,  
look upon the vivid colors of death  
witness the morbidity of existence  
and feel comfortable to call it what it is:  
beautiful

## MY OLDEST FRIEND

Is a spider plant  
that I can't kill  
and that's saying  
a lot  
given my record

You gave me a pack  
of rolling papers  
that lasted longer  
than it took  
for us to fall  
apart, again  
and that's saying  
a lot  
given my worst habit

I loved you  
and I could not say  
anything

## THANKSGIVING

One year my mother brought home a turkey

Alive

But barely

Wheezing through a broken neck

She said every living thing

Deserves love

And I resented her

For taking on the responsibility

Of resolving the world's cruelties

And failing miserably

I wish she'd left it to die

On the side of the road

Alone,

At least it wouldn't have been

For anybody else

## BLUE

we were in the back seat of the car  
windows steamed with passion  
we were crying  
until we were  
laughing  
because it hurt so much  
then we were touching, fumbling  
grasping for something  
to fill the empty space between us  
you were whispering  
*please don't leave me*  
as if people can ever keep each other

I wanted to inhale the ghost falling out  
your throat like a lost soul  
make it tangible  
the space where the cold air met your warm sigh  
breathe you in and hold it here  
let it haunt  
my insides

I want to be as sturdy as you need me to be

you used to let me talk about feelings in colors  
It's always been easier for me to explain things  
metaphorically  
to look at life through poetry

kissing was hot pink  
getting high was chartreuse  
holding on too tight  
white knuckle tight  
and the feeling left in my hands after  
letting go was a lonely shade of blue

we were in the back seat  
looking up into the blue black  
through the moon-roof  
full of the numbness that follows  
feeling too much all at once

we sat in silence  
drowning in a black and white truth  
we had been born from different kinds of love:  
you couldn't understand my hesitation  
and I couldn't comprehend your faith

you reached for my hand over the console  
I let my fingers find the spaces between yours  
squeezed  
held tight  
knuckle white  
and let you go,  
closed the car door behind me  
and walked home  
pockets stuffed with  
ten fingers

stained indigo

WHAT CAN I GIVE TO YOU?

I

the crushing weight of an empty page  
beckons to be filled  
or forgotten  
how can I arrive in a moment without immediately  
preparing for it to leave me,  
or me, it  
when you cannot coax the devil  
out from inside your ears  
in solitude, you can set the value of anything  
in your fixation alone  
there's nothing to compare it to,  
so I won't have to bargain with strangers  
on what we're willing to pay  
there's no price to life  
yet I'm bidding it away

II

what can I write to you, that is worth anything?  
what can I say that has not already been said?  
what can I offer except this: I am human, and it hurts to be.  
my brain, someday, is all fire and no forgiveness.  
flashbacks to a war I don't remember  
what first made me so afraid?  
or is it worse

the always lurking anxiety:  
the itch I cannot reach,  
the pimple I must pick  
my greatest fear materialized:  
that there is, has always been  
no explanation, no meaning  
the world goes on for forever,  
for what?  
I entertain the possibility  
that there's really  
nothing to it

## JUST LIKE HIM

when I was in the third grade,  
I went to my friends to play imaginative games  
and try on different characters  
her older brother had friends over,  
loud laughing boys, who took up space  
I was embarrassed by their ability to  
fill a room with themselves so shamelessly  
when dinner arrived they flooded in from the basement,  
I hid my stuffed toy beneath the table

we sat around a tilted tower of pizza boxes  
I was taught the polite portion size was two slices  
but one boy, sitting across from me  
did that thing thirteen year old boys do:  
dare themselves, then try to prove it to you  
he bet he could guzzle down 8 slices  
in one sitting

long after most everyone had their fill and  
retreated to the cave to play videogames  
I stayed glued to my chair, fixated,  
making my crust pieces last - tummy rumbling

when he finally finished his very own, whole pie  
grease rolling down his chin

he let out a tremendous belch that  
tickled all the children still present  
except me

I was too busy deciding right then  
that I wanted to grow up to  
be just like him

## CRAB APPLE TREE

the day came this week,  
as it always does  
that I cannot be bothered to leave my bed  
for much else but to empty the ashtray

I wrestle with bedsheets and lie defeated  
peer through the blinds  
from my window I can see  
a flowering crab apple tree

spring is here and she has changed  
from barren branches  
to clustered soft white blooms

when the wind blows  
she cries softly  
flowers falling out of her

I mourn the presence of empty space,  
the cold that passes through her

the thing about intention,  
is it's uselessness in the failure of fruition  
my father meant for her to  
be a Macintosh,  
but instead had planted  
seeds of resentment

## DANDELION

From the French “Dent de lion”

Meaning teeth of the lion

The dandelion pays no heed to whether

We name it a flower

Or a weed

It pushes through the concrete

Instinctively

Unconcerned

With the gap in your understanding

## IN DEFENSE OF SYLVIA PLATH

the world is cruel  
and how much crueler  
when you're a poet and a woman  
while they just see weakness  
with a death wish

to have your pain live on long after you  
manipulated, misinterpreted  
your abuser takes an eraser to your notes,  
the only evidence left of your eyes

resentment illuminated,  
glowing, glorified  
a mystery made of your misery

rest peacefully  
in a tomb of your own intuition  
unquestioned

to live closely with death, is more honest  
than speaking as if immune to it  
no matter who we think we are,  
what power we believe we possess over anything  
she was right  
mortality is our mutual condition

in the end,  
it's the small things we failed to recognize  
that will eat us alive

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“Subjective Satiation” refers to “The Family under the Bridge”. *Carlson, Natalie Savage., and Garth Williams. Harper, 2019.*

### About the Poet

Kayma Snook is an emerging poet from the small town Upton, Massachusetts. She will graduate in 2020 from Salem State University with a Bachelor's degree in English. *Tiny Victories* is her second poetry collection, preceded by *To Burn*. Her poetry has been her source of reflection and expression since preschool. She is inspired by the natural world, death, love, and people. She loves houseplants, Earl Grey tea, roller skating and antiques.

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